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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CODEL HOEKSTRA MEETS WITH PM SINIORA

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Prime Minister Siniora explained to Congressmen Hoekstra and Issa that Syria has three immediate objectives: destroy any chance for the Special Tribunal, regain its former control of the Lebanese government, and re-establish its past hegemony over the surrounding region. Siniora stated that Hizballah's call for street protests this week is the first step in Syria's plan to create political chaos, which would allow it to steadily re-exert its control. As he had discussed with U/S Fore the previous day, Siniora urged the U.S. to support raising the issue of Shebaa Farms in the Security Council to deal a serious blow to Syrian ambitions in Lebanon. Senior Lebanese advisor Mohammad Chattah raised a proposal that would link an agreement to transfer Shebaa to UN control within one year contingent upon full implementation of UNSCR 1701. Lastly, PM Siniora urged that any U.S. dialogue with Syria be unequivocal about the need to cease all interference in Lebanon. End summary.

12. (SBU) Congressmen Peter Hoekstra and Darrell Issa, along with the Ambassador, met with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora at the Grand Serail on November 29. Senior advisors Mohammad Chattah and Rola Nouraddine also attended the meeting, as did Congressional aide James Lewis and emboff. Appearing fully at ease despite the imminent start of street demonstrations by arch-adversary Hassan Nasrallah, PM Siniora emphasized that his government enjoyed the support of a large majority of Lebanon's electorate and would withstand Hizballah's call for his government's resignation.

13. (C) In a straightforward manner, PM Siniora explained that Iran and Syria were committed to reversing democratic gains in Lebanon at all costs. At their behest, Hizballah has embarked on a course they believe will produce political chaos and a collapse of the only democratic government Lebanon has experienced in the past 28 years. Specifically, Siniora stated that if his government falls, it will be next to impossible to form a new government because the Syrian-controlled president will refuse to sign the necessary formation decree. In his analysis, Iran wants Lebanon as a bargaining chip with the West, while Syria fervently wants to re-establish its complete control over a land it has never considered as sovereign. And last but not least, Syrian control would mean the end of the increasingly threatening Special Tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination and other crimes.

14. (C) Similar to his discussion with U/S Henrietta Fore the previous day, PM Siniora presented his reasons for moving forward on the issue of Shebaa Farms. Describing it as relatively small piece of territory with limited strategic value for Israel, he said a decision by the UN to discuss the matter would have great resonance in Lebanon. And rather than being interpreted as a political victory for Hizballah, it would be viewed by most Lebanese as an important achievement by the moderate Siniora government.

15. (C) Siniora's senior advisor, Mohammad Chattah, with the clear approval of Siniora, suggested that perhaps an agreement could be reached that would predicate the transfer of Shebaa to UN custodianship within the coming year on a complete implementation of UNSCR 1701. Chatta maintained this would be a clear win for both the democratic government of Lebanon and the security-conscious Israelis. Chatta indicated the mere discussion of Shebaa, and the possibility of ending Israeli occupation of that contested territory once and for all, would be considered a notable achievement for the Lebanon's forces of moderation and the process of negotiation. PM Siniora urged the congressmen to consider the issue and the advantages that would accrue from movement on it.

DEALING WITH AN ASCENDANT IRAN

16. (C) While Siniora stated that Syria was clearly behind the acts of political intimidation and violence in Lebanon,

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it was Iran which was actually wielding the greatest power and directing Hizballah, and to a lesser degree, Syria. The Prime Minister said Iran had successfully "hijacked" the Arab-Israeli conflict and had effectively used the lack of a just resolution as justification for its increasingly aggressive foreign policy.

17. (C) PM Siniora said it was evident that movement on the Middle East peace process was the surest way to curtail the growth of Iranian influence in the region, as well as the increasing threat from Islamic fundamentalism. He acknowledged there were many other factors within the Arab world that contributed to the sense of frustration in the "Arab street," but he urged his listeners to encourage the U.S. administration to re-dedicate its efforts to resolve this existential issue. He argued that progress on the peace process would bring Iran back down to earth, and permit the development of more normalized relations, both within the region and with Western countries.

BUT ANY DIALOGUE MUST "BE CLEAR AND FORCEFUL"

18. (C) Siniora listened to Congressman Hoekstra explain that dialogue may soon commence with both Syria and Iran on a range of issues, but also heard assurances that Lebanon's interests would not be jeopardized by such discussions. While questioning the timing, the Prime Minister cautioned the U.S. to enter into such dialogue carefully, with clearly delineated positions about what was and was not acceptable international behavior by these two calculating regimes. Iran, in particular, he noted was full of hubris at this time and had always proved skillful in diplomatic negotiations.

19. (C) In any such engagement, Siniora urged the U.S. to forcefully and unequivocally warn both Iran and Syria to respect the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon - and specifically to cease their interference in Lebanese affairs. He indicated that Lebanon could develop and carry out normal relations with any nation, but such interaction had to be undergirded by normal diplomatic relations, recognized

borders, and noninterference in domestic affairs.

¶10. (C) If Syria and Iran could be forced to cease their interference in Lebanon, PM Siniora said it would then be possible to treat Hizballah as a Lebanese problem. Clearly stating that his government wants to peacefully defuse the problem, Siniora described his strategy to steadily drive Hizballah "into a corner" from which it would have no alternative but to behave as a responsible entity and disarm.

Explaining that neither the LAF nor any other force could disarm Hizballah without provoking civil war, Siniora said his plan was to reinforce the LAF deployment to south Lebanon, unflinchingly support the UNIFIL mission, and search for the means to upgrade services, security and otherwise, to that area, in which for nearly 30 years Hizballah has had free rein. In closing, PM Siniora once again thanked the U.S. for its unwavering and critical support and said that if movement could be achieved on both Shebaa and the regional peace process, then Lebanon's experiment in democracy would survive and perhaps slowly exert its influence through the region.

FELTMAN